

שיח אברהם מצוי (שיח אברהם) Chaste Tree Berries – Vitex Agnus-Castus



A Female Friend

With the onset of summer, Vitex Agnus-Castus stretches out her graceful, feminine fingers and sends forth her upwardly pointing panicles; covered with fragrant lavender-colored blooms that look like lilacs and are quite attractive to butterflies and bees. Then, in the fall, with the sensitivity of a mother, she offers her healing fruit, bending down her supple branches to eager berry pickers. The berries are made into a tincture that can be taken daily to help women treat most feminine hormonal disorders, while balancing deep body rhythms, and nourishing psychic streams of creativity. Through a slow, steady re-grounding, it can also redirect hysteria – literally, ‘wild womb energy’ – into emotional calm usable energy. The entire plant has been used as a female remedy since ancient times:

“If blood flows from the womb, let the woman drink dark wine in which the leaves of the Vitex have been steeped” (Hippocrates 460-377 B.C).

“The tree furnish medicines that promote urine and menstruation” (Pliny. A.D. 23-79).

Chaste-Berry tincture is certainly one of the herbs from my herbal medicine cabinet that is most in demand, since it is known as an important uterine tonic regulating the female reproductive system. A friend of women of all ages – from those who need to regulate their period – to menopausal women seeking to alleviate hot flashes, Vitex is definitely the most effective herb for feminine ailments – a true ally for women of all ages.

Balancing and Nourishing Female Hormones

The reason that Chaste-Tree Berry Extract is so effective in treating such a range of female-related ailments is due, in large part, to the fact that it is an amphoteric remedy, which means that it can produce apparently opposite effects. In actuality, it is simply stabilizing its environment. In this way, it will enable whatever the body needs. Research studies have shown the presence of compounds in Vitex that are able to adjust the production of female hormones, as follows:

Increases Progesterone, Lowers Estrogen

In 1930, Dr. Gerhard Madaus conducted some of the first scientific research on the Vitex plant and developed a patent medicine from an extract of its dried fruits. He found it to have a “strong corpus-luteum effect which increases progesterone.” Daily use of Vitex tincture has been shown to enhance progesterone (LH) while inhibiting follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) and pro-lactin; moreover, Vitex gently lowers estrogen levels, thus protecting reproductive tissues from cancer. It has the effect of stimulating and normalizing pituitary gland function, which controls and coordinates the menstrual cycle, alleviating irregular menstruation (especially if accompanied by endometriosis). Its progesterone-like compound treats amenorrhea, dysmenorrhea, and menorrhagia (heavy menstruation), irregular premenopausal bleeding, PMS, endometriosis, and uterine fibroids.

Regulates Menstruation

Chaste-Berry can not only postpone menopause for pre-menopausal women and reestablish menstruation that has stopped prematurely, it can also facilitate the body in stabilizing the monthly cycle after the use of the birth control pill. In the late 1950's, 65% of 51 women who took Vitex showed improvement from their heavy bleeding, and excessively short menstrual cycles. About 47% of the women were entirely cured. When flooding and spotting are from corpus luterum deficiency (problems with ovulation), ally with Vitex. This plant may even be useful for the treatment of ovarian cysts and fibrocystic breast disease (non-cancerous breast lumps). Although, acne related to hormonal changes often disappears after even a few weeks, lacking phytosterols makes Vitex a general slow-acting tonic. Clinical research shows that Vitex may start working to treat imbalances after about 10 days, but for full benefit, you need to take it up to six months or longer.

Alleviates PMS

Chaste-Berries has been proven useful as an aid in Premenstrual Tension, relieving chronic menstrual cramps. A study in the British Medical Journal by R. Schellenberg evaluated the use of Chaste-Berry in 170 women with premenstrual syndrome over a period of three monthly cycles. The study reported a reduction or elimination of PMS symptoms such as anxiety, nervous tension, headaches, bloating, breast fullness, insomnia, or mood changes. The results showed a statistically significant improvement with over half of the women noting a 50% or greater improvement in their symptoms. No one discontinued the trial due to adverse effects (Htay TT, et al. *Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder*). The herb can also help treat premenstrual water retention. With PMS, a positive result may be felt by the second menstruation; however, permanent improvement may take up to a year, or longer.

Female Infertility and Breastfeeding

For women who are trying to get pregnant, Vitex may be helpful in healing female infertility by stimulating progesterone production and regulating the ovulatory cycle. It may be taken safely through the end of the third month of pregnancy, which may help prevent miscarriages as well (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/vitex-agnus-castus>). After the third month, Vitex is still safe to consume, but it's not recommended, because it may cause the flow of milk too early. In one carefully controlled study with 100 nursing mothers, it was found that women who took Vitex had an increased milk flow (http://www.healthy.net/Health/Article/Chaste_Berry/1646). Later research showed that the best way to stimulate milk production is to take Vitex the first ten days after birth.

Suppressing Sexual Desire

You may wonder why Vitex is called 'Chaste-Berry.' It received its 'sacred' name, due to its reputation as an anaphrodisiac – suppressing sexual desire. The Greek physician Dioscorides used it as a drink to lower libido more than 2,000 years ago. In ancient Greece and Rome, the temple priestesses also used it to lessen sexual desire. The Athenian matrons in the sacred rites of Ceres used to decorate their couches with Vitex leaves. Likewise, Roman wives whose husbands were abroad in the Legions, would spread the aromatic leaves on their couches to reduce sexual desire; thus, attesting to their faithfulness during wartime. (Blumenthal M, et al. *Herbal Medicine: Expanded Commission E Monographs*. Newton, MA: Integrative Medicine Communications; 2000). During the Middle Ages, Chaste-Berry's supposed effect on sexual desire led to it becoming a food spice at monasteries used to suppress sexual excitability; thereby leading to its common name 'Monk's pepper' or 'Cloister pepper' (Mills S, Bone K. *Principles and Practice of*

Phytotherapy. London: Churchill Livingstone; 2000). In Italy, chaste tree berries are thrown in front of novices as they enter the convent or monastery (Mabey R, ed. *The New Age Herbalist*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster; 1988). Although it is most legendary as an anti-aphrodisiac to men, how does it affect women? The verdict is not in and the evidence is mixed. Vitex may actually be an aphrodisiac to the female system (The Wise Women Way, Pages 107-108). Today Vitex does have a reputation as both as an anti-aphrodisiac and as an aphrodisiac!

Why is Vitex Called Siach Avraham Avinu (The Avraham Bush)?

Whereas the botanical name for the purple-blossomed, willowy bush that grows all around the Mediterranean is *Vitex Agnus Castus*, it is called 'Siach Avraham' (Abraham Bush) in Hebrew. According to Volume XI of *The Illustrated Encyclopedia to the Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel*, the plant gets its Hebrew name from the tradition that "it is the bush that was revealed to Avraham, with a ram caught in its branches, as he was about to slaughter Yitzchak."

וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה אֵיל אַחַר נֶאֱחָז בְּסִבְבָּךְ בְּקִרְנָיו וַיִּלֶּךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֵלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ: (ספר בראשית כב: יג)

"Avraham lifted his eyes and saw behold a ram behind him caught in the thicket by his horns" (*Bereishit* 22:13).

It is possible that Vitex suggested itself to Avraham, because where the binding of Yitzchak took place, in the hill country of Judea, where "It takes over completely along the banks of watercourses that run dry in summer, especially when these are stony." However, as opposed to many bushes of the Judean Hills, the Chaste-Berry Tree is not thorny or densely branched. Therefore, it not the kind of plant that an animal – even a long-horned one – could get caught in. Long before it became associated with Avraham, Vitex was called Chaste-Berry Tree by the ancient Greeks and Romans – hence the *Castus* which is Latin for 'chaste,' – and the *Agnos* which means 'chaste' in ancient Greek. However, *Agnus* in Latin means a 'lamb.' In the early Christian era, the Land of Israel was partially Greek-speaking, frequently visited by European Latin-speaking Christian pilgrims. When they encountered Vitex, conspicuous for its masses of flowers in the dry summer months when little else blooms in Israel, they inquired about it and were told that its name was *Agnos*. Not knowing Greek, they misunderstood this to mean *Agnus* in Latin and concluded that the Chaste- Berry Tree was called the 'Lamb Tree.' Being Christian pilgrims eager to identify whatever they saw in the Holy Land with some episode or description from the Bible, they either took this lamb to be the ram sacrificed by Avraham in place of Yitzchak or to be Yitzchak himself, sometimes referred to by Christian preachers as *Agnus Dei* or "the Lamb of God." This is how the Chaste-Berry Tree became *Vitex Agnus Castus*, 'Tree of the Pure Lamb,' named the 'Abraham Bush' by modern Hebrew botanists, on the basis of an old Christian legend stemming from an ignorance of Greek.

Hands On:

The time to pick the dark purple Chaste-Tree Berries with their aromatic odor and warm, peculiar taste is in the fall during the month of Cheshvan (October and November). The fruit is dry then and the clusters of berries, resembling peppercorns, easily slide into your hand. Just strip them off the stalk with your fingers. Harvest before the heavy rains in order to ensure the best quality. Wash the berries carefully in a colander. Place them in a permeable basket until completely dry (3 days - one week), or dry them in a dehydrator. When completely dry, you can store the Chaste-Berries in a closed glass container.

Herbal Remedies from the Judean Hills - Months of Tishrei/Cheshvan

Infusion: pour a cup of boiling water onto 1 teaspoonful of the ripe berries and leave to infuse 10-15 minutes. For treatment of most ailments, drink one cup of tea three times a day.

Tincture: It is much easier than you think to make your own tincture.

1. Fill a glass container half full with clean Chaste-Berries.
2. Cover the berries completely with distilled alcohol (40-50%).
You may use vodka or brandy. In Israel, you can buy a completely tasteless 95% percent alcohol in the supermarkets. I dilute this with an equal amount of purified water before use.
3. Make sure you fill the jar – to the spot where the lid ring begins – with 40-50% distilled alcohol; then, screw the lid on tightly. To avoid mildew, no part of the plants should be exposed to the air.
4. Label your jars and date them; then, let them steep in a cool, dark, and dry place.
5. Shake the jars now, and then again during the first week, to ensure that the alcohol penetrates all the berries.
6. Allow the tincture to steep for 6 weeks before straining.
7. Use a fine tea strainer, or muslin, to pour all of the juice out of the jar (or line a colander with muslin, or cheesecloth, and hold it over a bowl while you pour the tincture over the cloth) and into a suitable container. Press the plants gently with your hands to squeeze out all the liquid. You can even gather the sides of the cloth and twist it to get the very last drop!

How much of the tincture do you drink?

May we be blessed to keep our female juices in check this winter!